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SUBJECT: Vatican Discusses Normalizing Relations, Raises Papal Visit

REF: A) 08 Hanoi 1321 B) 08 Hanoi 736

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Monsignor Pietro Parolin, Holy See Under-Secretary for Relations with States, travelled to Vietnam February 15-22 at the invitation of the GVN to begin bilateral discussions on normalization of relations under the rubric of a Joint Working Group. During the visit, Parolin raised the possibility of a Papal visit in 2009, stating that it was his "wish" that the Pope would visit Vietnam. The Vatican also agreed to a joint communique which acknowledged progress in religious freedom in Vietnam and promised that that Church would not use its religious activities for "political purposes." Msgr. Parolin's recent visit continues to push the Vatican and GVN closer while also ensuring local Catholics stay within the fold. This recent delegation, the 18th in a series of such visits to Vietnam since 1990, highlights the commitment that both sides attach to working through issues affecting Vietnam's Catholic community, the second largest in Asia. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

Joint Working Group Established

12. (SBU) During Msgr. Parolin's last visit in June 2008 (Ref B), the two sides agreed to establish a Vietnam - Holy See Joint Working Group headed by a deputy foreign minister on each side to discuss bilateral relations. Leading up to the talks on a recent visit to Europe, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Thien Nhan informed our counterparts in the EU that the GVN took the talks seriously and that Vietnam would act on re-establishing relations with the Vatican well before China took action. Msgr. Parolin's visit marked the first meeting of the Joint Working Group, where he met with his counterpart VFM Nguyen Quoc Cuong. Both sides acknowledged that while concrete results were not forthcoming from the first round of talks, the formal creation of the Joint Working Group was an "important step" towards re-establishing relations. Parolin also stated that although the exact timeframe of normalization was not certain, the eventual outcome of the talks would be re-establishment of diplomatic relations. In an upbeat press conference after the second day of talks, Parolin said, "This is the first time that we've met with a formal, public agenda on the matter of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Vietnam -- that is progress."

13. (SBU) On February 19, the Ambassador spoke with VFM Cuong about the Joint Working Group and Cuong relayed that the GVN was pleased with the results. While noting that normalization of relations would not take place any time soon, he said that the bilateral talks were good starting point and that they would proceed in a "step by step" fashion. He highlighted that that this was the first time both sides had spoken explicitly of renormalization of relations, which marked progress in the relationship. On February 23, Poloff spoke with Father Nguyen Xuan Thuy, Chief Administrator for the Archbishop of Hanoi, regarding the visit. While Father Thuy

downplayed the accomplishments and stated that no new ground had been broken in the discussions, he acknowledged that establishment of the Joint Working Group was an important step forward. Father Thuy also admitted that local Catholics remain hurt by actions taken by the government during last year's property dispute, but that the Vatican continues to push the relationship forward.

Joint Communique Issued

¶4. (SBU) The two parties also issued a joint communique following the talks, which stated that the meetings took place in an atmosphere of "openness, frankness and mutual respect." The Vatican recognized the "positive progress in the religious life in Vietnam" and, in a veiled reference to last year's property disputes, promised that "the Church's religious activities would not be conducted for political purposes." The Vatican also stressed that the Church teaches parishioners "to be good citizens, working for the common good of the country."

¶5. (SBU) During his visit, Msgr. Parolin also met with Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs Nguyen The Doanh and later traveled to visit the two northern Catholic diocese in Bui Chu and Thai Binh. Parolin was accompanied by two Vietnamese priests working at the Holy See: Msgr. Francis Cao Minh Dung, head of the Bureau of South East Asian Affairs at the Secretariat of State, and Msgr. Barnabe Nguyen Van Phuong, bureau chief at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Papal Visit This Year?

¶6. (SBU) Msgr. Parolin created quite a stir in the Catholic community when he told the press that it was his "wish" that the Pope could visit Vietnam later this year. He later hedged his comments by clarifying that that a Papal visit was something that

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had not yet been agreed to by the GVN. He also informed the press that the GVN had turned down earlier requests for the Pope to visit Vietnam. MFA spokesman Le Dung stated that if the Vatican were to submit a formal request that the GVN would consider it, but that at this time no formal request has been made.

¶7. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Ho Chi Minh City.

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